THE REAL MIRACLE
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Psalm 130
Mark 5:21–43

"He took her by the hand and said to her, . . .
'Little girl, get up!'
And immediately the little girl got up
and began to walk about."
Mark 5:41–42 (NRSV)

The problem with miracles is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own.
Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by.
Not everyone who prays for one gets one. . . . Jesus' miracles remind us that the way things are is not the way they always will be. . . . Every healing, every banishment of evil is like a hole poked in the opaque fabric of time and space.
The kingdom breaks through and for a moment or two we see how things will be—
or how they really are right now in the mind of God—and then it is over.
The disciples go back to their rowing, the once-blind beggar walks off to look for work,
the little girl stretches her arms and takes the bread her stunned mother holds out to her.

Barbara Brown Taylor
Bread of Angels:
The Problem with Miracles

A month or so ago, the news media reported on the conclusion of a scientific study that set out to investigate the question of whether prayer really works. One group of hospital patients was told that strangers would be praying for their recovery. A second group was told that strangers might or might not be praying for them. A third group was not prayed for at all. The three groups were carefully monitored over a period of time, and when the results were in, the people who were prayed for did not recover any more quickly than either of the other two groups. As a matter of fact, the people who were told they were being prayed for by strangers seemed to be a little worse off than the others. Scientific conclusion: prayer doesn't work.

Well, no one knew quite what to make of this. Even the doctors weren't ready to discount prayer, because most of them have witnessed recuperation and healing that was unexpected and something of a mystery. Religious professionals were quick to point out that it's one thing to be told that strangers are praying for you and it is an entirely different experience to know that your friend, your colleagues, your church, your pastor is praying for you. Some even suggested that the prayed-for patients took longer to get well because of the stress, the self-imposed pressure to get better because "people out there are praying for me to get better and will be disappointed if I don't."

One of the best responses came from an Episcopal chaplain at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Raymond Lawrence, who said that "if it could be demonstrated that prayer works, our religious institutions would be degraded to a kind of commercial enterprise, like Burger King, where one expects to get what one pays for."

I am convinced that "I'm praying for you" becomes a channel through which God's love touches the life of another person. It does not automatically produce a miracle.

"The trouble with miracles," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one, and meanwhile some get them without asking."

Taylor thinks that "religious people can't stand the apparent randomness, so we spend a lot of time trying to figure out the formula." Sometimes we even make a situation worse by saying or implying that if the person believed enough, had enough faith, a healing miracle would happen. And so when it doesn't it, is the sick person's fault, and there's nothing like a little guilt on top of serious illness.

Our text today is about two miracles, one story inside the other. It is, I think, one of the most brilliant passages in the Bible, the way these two stories intersect, the way the characters play off one another.

Jesus is on the road when he is confronted by a prominent, influential man by the name of Jairus, whose young daughter is gravely ill. Jairus is desperate, so desperate he throws himself at Jesus' feet and begs him to come to Jairus's home and restore his daughter to health. Any parent, or grandparent for that matter, identifies with this man, understands exactly.

When his daughter was in the hospital struggling with anorexia and declining, Frederick Buechner wrote, “The only way I knew to be her father was to take care of her—to move heaven and earth to make her well, and, of course, I couldn’t do that. I didn’t have either the wisdom or the power to make her well” (*Telling Secrets*, pp. 23–26).

Since the last time I looked at this story, I have experienced the desperate helplessness, the feeling of impotence, witnessing a gravely ill infant, unconscious for days after open heart surgery, lying motionless in her crib, tubes keeping her alive, wires connecting her to a battery of high-tech monitors. For parents, grandparents, it is an experience of the limits of human love. And it was an experience of the miraculous, because she and every other infant in the pediatric cardiac intensive care unit at Children’s Memorial Hospital would have been in a very different and far more grave situation a generation ago. She’s fine. And it’s a miracle.

This is a desperate father who loves his little girl so much he throws himself at the feet of an itinerant teacher with a reputation for healing. Jesus responds, starts to walk with Jairus, toward his home, to see his critically ill daughter.

Just then there’s an interruption. A woman surreptitiously approaches Jesus from behind and touches his garment. He feels it—feels power go out of him. And he stops walking with Jairus and now turns to her. She’s desperate too. We don’t know her name, but we know her condition. She has been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. And her condition has made her a pariah, an outcast. Mark tells us something that makes members of the medical profession cringe. Ministers like to use it when they have the occasion to speak to a group of doctors. “She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” There’s nothing funny about her situation, however. No man wanted anything to do with her. It wasn’t only the awkwardness, the aesthetics of her condition; the law itself prescribed her marginalization. She was ritually unclean. Anyone who touched her was also unclean. She could not do what the religious law required: a monthly ritual of cleansing, which made a woman ritually, religiously clean again. Worst of all, she was not permitted to enter the synagogue because of her condition. It doesn’t take much imagination to understand this woman’s isolation and terrible loneliness, her guilt imposed on her by her religion and reinforced every single day by the community that would have nothing to do with her. And so she, like Jairus, is desperate, and comes to Jesus.

Jesus stops and talks with her. I imagine Jairus’s anxiety increasing. His daughter is dying and Jesus is talking with this woman. I imagine her cowering in fear. She didn’t expect to be noticed, didn’t think she was worth his notice. A touch of his garment is all she wanted. Instead she got

his attention, his compassion, his love. “Daughter,” he calls her—a term of endearment—“your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

The problem is that Jesus is now unclean. He has been touched by a ritually unclean woman. The law is clear about that, too. He must stop, retire, take off his clothes, wash them, bathe—and enter no house until sundown. But, instead, Jesus continues with Jairus, continues as an “unclean holy man,” a “wounded healer.”

Religion here, instead of healing, is getting in the way of healing: religious rules are preventing health. A new vaccine was announced recently that will protect women from a cancer that begins with a sexually transmitted disease. And some religious organizations are objecting, arguing that availability of the vaccine, which is to be administered to young girls, will encourage sexual relations before marriage. The risk of cervical cancer is acceptable because of the possible violation of a religious rule. Condoms prevent AIDs. No one disputes that. Religious groups oppose their availability. Good sex education prevents teen pregnancy. Everyone knows that. Religious groups oppose it. Jesus here deliberately violates a traditional religious rule, a taboo, in order to heal and restore.

Furthermore he reaches across a social and religious barrier to a marginalized, rejected outcast and restores her to wholeness and welcomes her to the kingdom of God, where there are no outcasts.

It is impossible to read this without a new sense that it is the job of the religion—and the church—that bears his holy name not to invest all its energy in protecting its purity, but to live out its life opening its doors, opening its arms, to welcome all in his name, particularly those who are marginalized and outcast.

That’s what the church of Jesus Christ, his church, ought to be about, not building barriers, drawing lines to exclude, but reaching out, touching, extending hospitality, accepting, welcoming, affirming, receiving specifically those who the culture and religion itself has branded as unclean, calling them by their real names: daughters and sons of God.

It is the issue we have been given to struggle with in our time, and it is not easy. It is seriously dividing the Episcopal Church, our own church; the Methodists and Lutherans are not far behind. Some predict that it is the issue that will split the denominations down the middle.

Professor Jack Rogers, who taught theology at Fuller Seminary, a conservative evangelical institution, and then at San Francisco Presbyterian Seminary, has impeccable conservative academic credentials. Jack was the

moderator of our General Assembly a few years ago and has taken on this issue as the culmination of his distinguished academic career. The result is a very helpful, carefully researched, and thoughtfully and graciously argued new book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church.* I was with Jack and a group of former moderators last week at a conference about the future of our church and heard him tell the stories we all know of gay and lesbian Presbyterians rejected by the church, excluded from leadership, sometimes denied access to full membership, stories of say and lesbian couples denied baptism for their adopted children, heartbroken, leaving their church, the church that baptized and confirmed them, the church that has branded them unclean. And Jack told other stories, of gracious congregations who welcome and include and extend the miracle of God's love in Jesus Christ to all.

And now Jesus resumes his journey to Jairus's house. Messengers approach. It's too late. The little girl has died. Mourners are already there, weeping, funeral arrangements are underway. Unfazed, Jesus continues. Be realistic, Jesus. Face reality. She's dead. On he walks. "She's just sleeping," he says. "She's going to be alright." And they laugh at him.

Remember, please, he's unclean. He's been touched by an unclean woman, and he's now entering the house of a leader of the synagogue, a fastidious keeper of the Holiness Code. Nothing in this house is unclean—except Jesus.

And then Jesus takes her small hand in his. The law is clear about that too. Touching a dead body also renders a person unclean, and those who do so must also engage in ritual cleansing and bathing. So a second time, Jesus is unclean, this time because of his own action. And he takes her small hand in his and lifts her lifeless body and for the second time says something so intimate and affectionate, something so startling that Mark gives it to us untranslated, in the very Aramaic Jesus spoke: "Talitha Cum": "little girl"—actually, "little lamb"—"get up."

We want to analyze. We want to submit that to a scientific study. And I invite you this morning to stop that, to hear it like a child, with wonder, with a "second naiveté" a philosopher commends to us, to doubt your own doubts, to simply let this story and what it suggests about God and God's love in Jesus Christ into your life, into both your intellect and into your heart.

"Out of the depths, I cried to you," we read together earlier. "O Lord, hear my prayer." That is the real miracle here. There is nowhere we can go that God's love in Jesus Christ does not go with us. There is no depths to which we can descend that the love of Christ cannot reach us. There is no earthly condition, no sickness, no debilitation, no alienation, no isolation, no

loneliness, no self-imposed guilt, no depression that can prevent Jesus Christ from finding us and gathering us in and welcoming us to his kingdom, to our place at his table, to our true home.

That is the real miracle. God's love that finds us wherever we are.

Years ago, when open heart surgery was in its infancy, the patient was packed in ice to lower body temperature and after surgery continued to be kept that way for a while. It was my first experience of it. The doctor allowed me in to see Dick in recovery. And there he was: lifeless, motionless, packed in ice. I wasn't sure what to do, so I started to quote the only scripture that came to mind:

> Where can I flee from your presence?
> If I make my bed in hell—you are there;
> If I flee to the farthest limits of the sea,
> even there your right hand shall hold me fast.

I said a short prayer and left.

A few days later I visited him again. Amazingly, he was sitting up in bed, looking a little worse for wear but very much alive. And the first thing he said to me was,

> Where can I flee from your presence? . . .
> If I make my bed in hell you are there."

That's the miracle: in his depths, he had heard. Out of the depths we cry to God and God hears.

Sometimes you pray and the miracle doesn't happen. What does happen—always—is God's love, and that makes all the difference in the world. If that father knew that and trusted it, as he obviously did, Barbara Brown Taylor says, "he could have survived whatever happened next, even if Jesus had walked into his daughter's room, closed her eyes with his fingertips, and pulled the sheet over her head. Trusting that she was still in God's good hands, even though she had slipped through his" (*Bread of Heaven*, p.139).

The real miracle: God's love in Jesus Christ.

Amen.